

Vantage

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J. A. van Ek and J. L. M. Trim

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Introduction

Vantage is the third level in a series of specifications of learning objectives developed within the Council of Europe's programme for the promotion of language learning in Europe. The series is intended to offer guidance and support to the many 'partners for learning' whose co-operation is necessary to the creation of a coherent and transparent structure of provision for effective learning relevant to the needs of the learners as well as of society, which normally provides the resources. Without setting up bureaucratic mechanisms of control, it provides a series of reference points, common objectives towards the achievement of which all can work independently but in harmony – curriculum planners, examining and qualifying authorities, course designers and materials producers, teacher trainers and last but by no means least the teachers and learners through whose interaction organised learning takes place.

The series is directed towards those – probably the great majority of ordinary language learners – who want to use another language for communication with people who speak it, both for transacting the business of everyday life and for exchanging information and opinions on private life and public affairs.

It therefore sets out to define in some detail what such an objective means in practice: what users of a language are most likely to wish or need to be able to do in the communication situations in which they take part and consequently what they have to know and the skills they have to develop in order to be able to communicate effectively in those situations.

The Threshold Level may be regarded as the key element in the series, since it attempts to identify the minimal linguistic equipment which will enable a learner to deal with the more predictable situations of daily life, transactional and interactional, as an independent agent. 'Minimal' is somewhat misleading here, of course; a substantial learning effort is required, not only to cover the range of language functions and the expression of general and specific notions which constitute the building blocks, but also to gain control over them to the extent necessary to deal with the situations of use with some degree of confidence and facility. Even so, 'independence' is relative. A learner at *Threshold* level is still dependent on the goodwill of the interlocutor, especially a more experienced or native speaker.

Waystage has subsequently been developed as an early learning objective designed to provide the learner with a broad range of resources at a very elementary level so as to satisfy the most urgent

requirements for linguistic survival in the most predictable situations facing a visitor.

Vantage, as the name implies, carries learners with the same needs and perspectives a stage further. What are the needs and motivations of such learners?

First, they will be aware that the principles of 'maximum exploitation of minimal means' will have given them a minimally adequate equipment to deal with a wide range of situations in daily life, and strategies to use that equipment to the best effect. However, they will realise that their ability is very limited by comparison with their ability to deal with similar situations in their native language. They can deal with straightforward situations in a straightforward way, but may feel some sense of frustration when a situation becomes more problematic and they need to understand and express ideas in a more developed way, making finer distinctions of meaning than their linguistic equipment allows. They may feel that they are unable to do themselves justice, that they are obliged to say what they *can* say rather than what they *want* to say. This feeling is common, of course, to users of a foreign language at any level, and to native speakers too when they are on unfamiliar ground. It is likely to be particularly strong, however, when a learner can cover a wide communication range, but with only a small vocabulary to deal with the vast wealth of specific notions in each area. Furthermore, whilst the exponents of language functions and general notions will have covered between them the major grammatical resources of the language, the learner at T-level will be far from having these resources under control for general purposes. They may well have figured as part of a fixed formula for expressing a particular function. Even where a structure rather than a fixed formula has been listed as the exponent of a function, the learner is not necessarily expected to be able to handle its full potential in such a way as fully to meet the criteria of accuracy, fluency and appropriateness of usage. An obvious example is the function of 'reporting (describing and narrating)' for which the primary exponent is given as 'declarative sentences'. This cannot, of course, be interpreted to mean that when narrating an event or describing a person or object, a learner after some 400 hours of initial language learning is expected to have at his or her disposal the full unbounded set of declarative sentences of indefinite complexity, using all resources brought together in the Grammatical Appendix and incorporating all the general notions set out in Chapter 6.

For these reasons, language learners who have reached *Threshold* level in a particular language and want to continue to learn are not so much called upon to do entirely new things in the language, as to meet the challenges of daily living in a more adequate and satisfying way, less restricted by the limited resources – especially perhaps in vocabulary –

which they have been able to acquire in the time available. At the same time, they will achieve a more fluent and accurate control over the communication process. Accordingly, *Vantage* level goes beyond *Threshold* level particularly in the following respects:

- the refinement of functional and general notional categories, with a consequent growth in the available inventory of exponents. In the functional area (Chapter 5), the expansion is perhaps most notable in the expression of emotions and in the conduct of discussion.
- a considerable enlargement of concrete vocabulary expressing specific notions in thematic areas set out in Chapter 7. It should be emphasised that at *Vantage* level we make no attempt to propose a defined recommended vocabulary. The needs and interests of learners are by this time far too diverse for such a proposal to be desirable or realistic. Experience takes us all in different directions and we need to talk to other people about our own situations, jobs and leisure interests. Of course, post-*Threshold* level learners will continue to share a common framework of 'universal experience' and to build up a shared vocabulary for referring to the people, creatures and objects that form the common context in which our lives are led. However, above *Threshold* level we expect learners to be more autonomous, able to take increasing responsibility for their learning and able to make more effective use of reference books and other information sources in order to develop a vocabulary appropriate to their own needs and interests. We therefore have made more use of open word classes with suggestions for an increased range of specific items which we should expect to figure in a common core.
- recognition and limited control of important register varieties. Up to *Threshold* level we have advised learners to keep to a 'neutral' register, avoiding excessive formality on the one hand and colloquial or familiar usage on the other. In moving to *Vantage* level, learners will gain more experience of the situations which call for more formal or more colloquial usage and judge when they may appropriately follow suit. Correspondingly, a number of colloquial exponents are given for those language functions in which they are more likely to occur. At the phonetic level, *Vantage* learners will be able to cope with the degree of phonetic reduction normal in informal spoken English.
- increased ability to understand and produce longer and more complex utterances. Up to *Threshold* level, it is expected that learners will mostly be participating in dialogues consisting of short turns. In many cases simple sentences or very short sequences of simple sentences will be used, the relations between them being inferred by the listener. At *Vantage* level learners will be able to follow and

produce longer discourses structured by such means as the use of sentence adverbs, the anaphoric use of pronouns and generics to refer back to items already mentioned, the use of intonational prominence to distinguish given from new information, the construction of complex sentences by the embedding of subordinate clauses (though not too many!), etc. (See Chapter 8.)

- increased range and control of goal-directed conversation strategies. Up to *Threshold* level, learners are preparing to deal with the simpler, more predictable situations of daily life in a straightforward way, following the Co-operative Principle (see Chapter 4) and expecting their interlocutor to do likewise. They are able to answer the question: 'What do I say next?' by reference to the relatively fixed schemata (verbal interaction patterns) that underlie most routine transactions and exchanges of information. They are likely to have difficulty in coping with unexpected twists in conversation, or with those complications in everyday transactions that always seem to affect the customer just ahead of one in a queue! They may then use compensation strategies to enlist the aid of the interlocutor. More experienced (and sympathetic) interlocutors will most probably adjust their normal conversational behaviour to simplify the communicative task for the benefit of the less experienced foreign learner. At *Vantage* level, interaction is less constrained and both partners can act in a more flexible and natural way, following basic goal-directed conversation strategies rather than adhering as closely as possible to fixed verbal exchange patterns (see Chapter 8).
- greater sociocultural and sociolinguistic competence. Some earlier criticisms of *The Threshold Level* centred on its alleged minimalism and neglect of cultural issues. In fact, the level represented, though it attempts to set out the minimal linguistic requirements for a communicative proficiency sufficient to meet the demands of everyday living, is far from 'minimal' in the learning effort required. As for the neglect of sociocultural values, language is a socio-cultural phenomenon central to human social existence. The everyday use of any language is impregnated with the culture of the community that uses it to organise its communication. All language learning involves intercultural experience. However, in *Threshold 1990* the relation was made more explicit by the addition of a new chapter on *Sociocultural competence*, including a more detailed treatment of politeness conventions in a variety of British English often taken as a model for foreign learners. At *Threshold* level, the sociocultural is largely a matter of awareness, though learners are encouraged to act in accordance with that awareness. By *Vantage* level, the learner's grasp of interculturality will be that much deeper, so that he or she will be able to respond more flexibly to the nature of the situations of use and the interpersonal as well as the social role relations appropriate to the situation. This flexibility is of

course all the more important when English is being used as a means of communication between non-native speakers. It is not to be expected that they will both conform to the same British cultural norms. Sensitivity, awareness, openness to new experience, tolerance and acceptance of sociocultural diversity are needed. To act accordingly is a sign of the increasing linguistic maturity appropriate to a *Vantage* learner (see Chapter 11).

- improved reading skills applied to a wider range of texts. Up to *Threshold* level, learners are expected only to be able to deal with written texts of a type related directly to the situations and topics set out in the extended characterisation of the global objective (Chapter 3). They are largely confined to public signs and notices, private and routine public correspondence and information in newspapers and magazines. Learners who choose to go on with language learning may be expected to have a wider range of interests, which they will wish to develop through written media – perhaps increasingly electronic as well as printed – and extended listening. As their general and more specific vocabulary expands, and their use of dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other reference materials becomes more efficient, as well as their ability to deduce word meaning from context, they will be able to select and understand more demanding texts and become increasingly able to differentiate their mode of reading, employing different strategies according to what they need to take from a particular text. This flexibility will increase their reading speed so as to cross the threshold of satisfactory ‘value for effort’.
- a higher level of skill in the processes of language production and reception. It has often been remarked that the use of language by a mature adult native speaker is the most highly skilled activity anywhere to be found. We have to accept the fact that in attempting to deal with a full range of communicative tasks which arise in daily living *Threshold* learners will have problems in doing so with the very limited resources at their disposal and that they will have further problems in actually bringing those resources to bear on a particular occasion in a particular situation. Whilst learner aptitudes and abilities undoubtedly vary greatly, we cannot expect, at any level, perfect execution of the tasks, activities and processes set out in the objective, nor should we. Perfect execution would only be attainable by spending a great deal of time on overtraining at the expense of broadening experience. There is a necessary balance to be struck between extending knowledge and training performance. Thus the *Threshold* learner not only has a wider coverage than the *Waystage* learner, but also has a more consolidated and firmer grasp of the *Waystage* objectives. Similarly, in moving from *Threshold* to *Vantage*, the learner improves not only in the respects set out above, but also consolidates the *Threshold* objectives and satisfies higher

performance criteria in these areas. These will include greater freedom from memory lapses, fewer mistakes and slips of the tongue, fewer blockages and hesitations, fewer false starts and incomplete sentences, a smoother utterance with better phrasing and intonation and a higher speech rate with shorter delay in response. There will be less need to use compensatory strategies. As to receptive processes, *Vantage* learners will have less difficulty in identifying words, phrases and sentences in the flow of speech, especially when phonetically reduced forms are used or when a slight foreign or non-standard accent is used. They will be better able to understand speech under noisy conditions, or with acoustic distortion in public address systems, or with interference from other sound sources. They will 'lose track' less frequently and when they do so will find it easier to break back in.

In all, *Waystage*, *Threshold* and *Vantage* now offer to all practitioners a description of the language needed to assure a learner's ability to deal effectively with the challenges presented by everyday life, presented at three levels rising from a minimal equipment to deal with the highest priority needs, through the minimum needed to deal with the full range of requirements for a visitor or temporary resident, to an enriched equipment adequate to deal effectively with the complexities of daily living. It is, of course, for the individual user to decide how to make use of this descriptive apparatus, in order to define appropriate objectives for a particular set of learners, whilst of course bearing in mind the need to co-ordinate the efforts of different providers in developing a learning/teaching system. Users can supplement the specification if some needs of the constituency are not met, or cut out elements they do not need. Items which are of marginal value to the learners envisaged can be replaced by others. The process can be articulated into more stages if a particular educational system is organised in a 'drip feed' mode, or fewer if there is a full-time intensive programme for experienced and gifted learners. With courses for non-beginners, the description can be used to specify a prior knowledge requirement as well as the objective. Modules can be derived by concentrating on some defined sub-part of the specification, as can partial competence.

This flexibility is possible because a single model has been used for the successive levels *Waystage*, *Threshold* and *Vantage*. We trust that all those concerned with planning and implementing language teaching and learning will find it useful in setting objectives which are desirable, appropriate and feasible for the particular learners towards whom they undertake responsibility.

J. A. van Ek
J. L. M. Trim
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